

# Dialectic and 'Verstehen'<sup>1)</sup>

by Dr. J. VERHOEVEN

Sociology is sometimes reproached with the fact that it is still engaged in a search for its object so that as a science it has not achieved any coherent picture of society, nor can it achieve this. In addition to this there is the quarrel over methods which was perhaps formerly more violent than it is now, but it has still not entirely disappeared from the scene. Attempts at reconciliation have been made but have not always found a sufficient following. It is, nevertheless, worth-while continuing the dialogue if a more generally accepted picture of sociology is to be arrived at. In this discussion there is a confrontation between dialectic and « understanding » (« verstehen »).

The necessity with which the sociologist is confronted of defining his object does not imply that he can do this completely independently of all social-scientific tradition. On the contrary, the sociologist must take the intersubjectivity of his science just as much into account as the researcher into any other scientific discipline. We shall thus begin this study with the confrontation of several recent investigations into the various definitions of the object and their methodological consequences in order, by so doing, not to break the link with the past.

In fact the most recent discussions have been about a question which is very old and which already occupied a central position in social philosophy, namely « from which angle must the relationship of the individual to the community be approached »<sup>2)</sup>. In sociological writings various solutions have been put forward to this problem. One school considers the group as a reality which can be studied in se. Another tendency does not allow the group any existential value and considers that the individual is the only existing reality. Now there is a tendency to accept neither the first nor the second solution but to place both in a dialectical relationship. G. Gurvitch is one of the pioneers of this. Our attention will thus go in the first place

<sup>1)</sup> This article is a condensed version of chapter IV of J. Verhoeven, *De sociologische verklaring van de sociale controle*. Malines, Publishers : Sinfra, 1969, pp. 107-155. The extensive examination of the work of A. Schütz has not been included.

<sup>2)</sup> P. J. Bouman, *Fundamentele sociologie*. Antwerp-Utrecht, N.V. Standaard Boekhandel, Het Karveel N.V., 1966, p. 43.

to his work and to that of writers following the same lines. In opposition to Gurvitch, A. Schütz rejects this dialectic at a methodological level. His arguments seem important to us for a comparison of the significance of both schools of thought. On the basis of this comparison an option for one or other school of thought will be justified. This will in the end boil down to a choice which will take Alfred Schütz's sociology as a guideline. In the second section we shall evaluate « understanding » (« verstehen ») and give a definition of sociology with the methodological consequences of this.

## I. The Dialectic of Person-Community Questioned.

### 1. *The Solution of G. Gurvitch.*

The diversity which exists in sociology as far as the definition of the object is considered and the methodological consequences flowing from this no longer needs to be gone into in great detail. This fact is well enough known from books on the history of sociology. It was by this diversity that G. Gurvitch was confronted when he began his search for the specific object of sociology<sup>3</sup>). In particular he throws light upon the opposition — or is it the complementariness? — between E. Durkheim and M. Weber, a comparison which is also to be found in J. Rex, P. Berger and A. C. Zijderveld<sup>4</sup>). What are according to Gurvitch, the merits and shortcomings of these two writers?

In Gurvitch's opinion, three definitions of sociology can be distinguished throughout Durkheim's work. In these definitions he sees Durkheim's call to encompass all of social reality in its entirety and to explain the phenomena which occur in the social universe by the characteristics of the whole. Gurvitch is, however, of the opinion that to limit the explanation to the causal ties, as Durkheim does, is wrong. Neither has he made the significance of his social types sufficiently clear. They are in fact more like types of societies which are improved versions of those of Spencer<sup>5</sup>).

Max Weber has provided a solution to this latter problem by introducing the « ideal type » as a means of procedure. The « understanding » (« verstehende ») method was the way in which this ideal type could be constructed. In opposition to E. Durkheim, who had taken social institutions as the object of sociological investigation, Weber defined « social action » as the object of investigation<sup>6</sup>). This social action must be

<sup>3</sup>) G. Gurvitch, « Objet et méthode de la sociologie », in G. Gurvitch, ed., *Traité de sociologie. I*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1962, pp. 3-27.

<sup>4</sup>) J. Rex, *Key Problems of Sociological Theory*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965 (1961), p. 78. Rex only treats of a partial opposition. P. L. Berger, *Sociologische denken*. Rotterdam, Universitaire pers, 1965, p. 137, (translated by J. M. M. De Valk).

Berger prefers to speak of complementariness as will be explained in more detail later.

A. C. Zijderveld, *Institutionalising*. Hilversum-Antwerp, Paul Brand, 1966, pp. 65-104.

<sup>5</sup>) G. Gurvitch, *op.cit.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>6</sup>) E. Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1963 (1895), p. XXII : « ...Sociology can be defined thus : the science of institutions, of their genesis and of their functioning ».

approached in an « understanding » way. The danger of psychologism which is linked with this method is, in Gurvitch's opinion, reduced by M. Weber because of his great attention to culture. Weber is a nominalist. Social reality has no character of its own ; it consists solely of individuals who have relationships to each other. The merit of Weber lies, according to Gurvitch, in his introduction of the ideal type and his attention to explanation as well as to understanding. However, besides this Gurvitch found eight defects in Weber : « a) the arbitrary connection between understanding and subjective interpretation ; b) the impossibility of justifying the transition from internal, subjective meanings to social and cultural meanings ; c) his rejection of all objective criteria in the formation of the types ; d) the connection of the types with a spiritualistic culturalism ; e) the diffusion of the types and their unsuitability for being applied to whole social phenomena and structures ; f) the destruction of social reality by probabilistic and individualistic nominalism which makes it impossible for Weber to encompass society, groups, classes, we-relationships and their direct acts ; ... ; g) the combination of formalism, culturalism, and psychologism which do not form a synthesis... ; h) the absence of any dialectical spirit » <sup>7)</sup>.

Gurvitch considers he can bridge this opposition between Durkheim and Weber at the level of the domain and the method of sociology which together form the object of sociology <sup>8)</sup>.

Social reality forms the actual domain of sociology. This social reality is irreducible ; it forms an indissoluble whole. It is, however, multidimensional ; it can be divided into depth strata (« paliers en profondeur »). In total social phenomena (« phénomènes sociaux totaux ») these depth strata form an indissoluble whole, although a certain discontinuity and conflict between the strata is not out of the question. It is likewise in the constant conflict between the partial and the total social phenomena that the richness of the social phenomenon is revealed. This dialectic is expressed in the complementarity, the reciprocal implication, the ambiguity, the polarization and the reciprocity of the perspectives. Depth strata and dialectic enable total social reality to be understood in its movement. And in addition to these two elements there is movement within the structures which are constantly engaged in a process of structuration or else they suddenly disappear. These structures are, however, subordinate to the total social phenomena which make them possible.

Social reality is the object of a number of social sciences. Method must thus be the criterion by which sociology is to be distinguished from other social sciences.

Gurvitch distinguishes three methods : 1) a systematizing and analyzing method (as in law), 2) an individualizing or singularizing method (as in history and ethnography), and 3) a qualitative and discontinuous typology. This latter is the actual method of sociology. Besides this appeal to typology sociology also requires both

6 contd.) M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Grundriss der Verstehenden Soziologie*. Vol. I. Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1956, p. 1 : « Sociology... should be defined as : a science which attempts to understand social action interpretatively and thus to explain causally its course and its effects ».

<sup>7)</sup> G. Gurvitch, *Objet... op.cit.*, pp. 12-15.

<sup>8)</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 19-27.

a method in order to understand the total picture and in addition empirical dialectic. We shall deal with these three methods in a little more detail as they are of great importance for Schütz's work.

The typological method consists in constructing qualitative and discontinuous types which on the one hand generalize since they can be repeated, and on the other hand singularize since they give the diversity of real social cadres and of their structures. Typology also uses historical data in order to stress the discontinuities. The method assumes an understanding of the wholes and of their significance. These types are by no means « utopian rationalizations », such as are found in the work of Max Weber. This specific character of the sociological types requires a dialectic which must make the construction of these types possible. The characteristic of this dialectic is that « it rejects the immobilization of the concepts »<sup>9)</sup>.

Sociological method in addition to this typological method, also attempts to encompass the total picture of social reality. Not one depth stratum, one sector of social reality, but all the depth strata and sectors must be examined by the sociologist and here again he must take the dialectical movement into consideration which exists between all the component parts of social reality.

All these elements together allow Gurvitch to define sociology : « Sociology is qualitative and discontinuous typology based on the dialectic of astructural, structurable and structured total social phenomena which it studies as a whole at every depth stratum, at every level and in every sector, in order to follow their movements of structuration, destructuration and dissolution, finding their explanation in collaboration with history »<sup>10)</sup>.

Dialectic occupies a central position in this definition by Gurvitch. In his opinion dialectic plays an irreplaceable role both in social reality<sup>11)</sup> and in sociological method<sup>12)</sup>. Precisely for this reason it seems to us to be very useful to describe this concept more closely.

He deals very extensively with dialectic in his work « *Dialectique et Sociologie* ». A few ideas from this will make what has been said clearer, as dialectic is not interpreted by all writers in the same way.

After examining a number of writers Gurvitch finally distinguishes three aspects of dialectic :

1) « As real movement dialectic is the way taken by human totalities in their composition and decomposition, in the reciprocal generation of their wholes and their parts, their acts and their works, as well as in the struggle which these totalities wage against the internal and external obstacles which they encounter on their way »<sup>13)</sup>.

2) « ...dialectic is a method and more broadly speaking a manner of encompassing, understanding, knowing... »

<sup>9)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>10)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

<sup>11)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>12)</sup> G. Gurvitch, *Dialectique et Sociologie*. Paris, Flammarion, 1962, pp. 13, 24, 26, 27, 179-180, 182-220.

<sup>13)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 179. See also p. 24.

This method is characterized by :

a) « ... the demolition of all concepts acquired and crystallized in order to avoid their mummification which comes from their incapacity to encompass living human totalities or to take simultaneously into consideration the wholes and their parts which are reciprocally generated » <sup>14)</sup>.

b) « The dialectical method always contains an element of negation... because it denies both the laws of formal logic, and every abstraction, every separation which would not take into consideration concrete wholes... » <sup>15)</sup>.

c) « ... a method of combating all simplification, crystallization, immobilization or sublimation in the knowledge of real human wholes and in particular of social totalities » <sup>16)</sup>.

d) « ... which eliminates... the taking up of any previous philosophical or scientific position... » <sup>17)</sup>.

3) ' ... those dialectical relationships into which dialectical method and real dialectical movement enter » <sup>18)</sup>.

Dialectic thus dominates all sociology, both as far as its domain and its method are concerned and the reciprocity of the two. Gurvitch is rightly of the opinion that this dialectic can provide movement reaching into infinity. In order to limit this endless dialectical movement he thinks, however, that more than one procedure must be resorted to which can be used either individually, or in competition with each other, or in conjunction with each other. He distinguishes between five procedures, although in his opinion this list is not definitive : dialectical complementarity, reciprocal dialectical implication, dialectical ambiguity, dialectical polarization and the reciprocity of the perspectives <sup>19)</sup>. The nature of the mutual ties we need not go into here.

What are, in Gurvitch's opinion, the limits of dialectic ? « ... it (dialectic) does not explain, it gives us no scheme of explanation ».

Dialectic gives no explanation, it only gives « description ». Not one of the five procedures explains anything. It is, however, singular causality which best explains things. It is linked with the structure and the total social phenomenon for which sociology forms the discontinuous and qualitative types. This leads finally to a logical cohesion which forms a historical causality <sup>20)</sup>.

Gurvitch's dialectic goes further than that between individual and community which was questioned above. The following sentence illustrates this clearly : « How is it possible in fact to study the comings and goings, the interpenetration and the tension between the strata, between the levels (we, groups, total societies), between the astructural, structured and structurable elements, between what is spontaneous and what organized, between the movements of structuration, destructuration and re-

<sup>14)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 180. See also p. 26.

<sup>15)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 180. See also p. 25.

<sup>16)</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 180-181. See also p. 26.

<sup>17)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 181.

<sup>18)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 182.

<sup>19)</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>20)</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 218-220.

structuration, between the individual and society — all indissolubly linked and in virtual and actual conflict — without having recourse to dialectic? Is it not by applying the test of dialectic to all these elements? » <sup>21)</sup>.

One of Gurvitch's difficulties seems to us to be the fact that the types which he distinguishes are embodied in fixed concepts <sup>22)</sup>, while on the other hand he asserts that by means of dialectic he can free himself from mummification of the concepts <sup>23)</sup>.

To conclude this survey of G. Gurvitch's ideas we should like to make the following reservation. Gurvitch thinks he can stop the infinite dialectical movement by appealing to five dialectical procedures <sup>24)</sup>, which can be used individually, in competition or together. Thus he does not seem to be able to maintain the dialectic between these procedures. Let us remember that Gurvitch's dialectic was total; there were dialectical relationships not only within social reality and methodology individually, but also just as much between them reciprocally. And on the other hand, Gurvitch still leaves an opening for the infinite movement of dialectic by the possibility of inventing new procedures whose value he does not fix.

## 2. *The Solution of A. C. Zijderfeld* <sup>25)</sup>.

The problem of *Institutionalization* is, it is true, greater than the question which we put at the beginning of this article. However, it runs largely parallel to our problem and the problem outlined above as posed by Gurvitch. How does Zijderfeld answer the questions?

Zijderfeld does not limit his analysis to sociology. The analysis of the realistic-catastrophic approach of E. Durkheim is followed by that of the anthropologist A. Gehlen, and the nominalistic-anascopic approach of Max Weber by that of K. Marx. Zijderfeld's point of departure thus runs to a considerable extent parallel to that of Gurvitch: to bridge the opposition between Durkheim and Weber (and between Gehlen and Marx). The solution to this he finds in dialectic, just as G. Gurvitch does.

Dualism provides no satisfactory solution. It only regards man in society as a being with a dual character: man as a social being and man as an individual; they can be studied separately but do not enter into any dialectical relationship. In dualism the « reciprocally determining (dialectical) relationship » is not revealed <sup>26)</sup>.

In Zijderfeld's opinion this reciprocity between the structure and the individual can be encompassed by dialectic. For this concept he refers to Gurvitch and comes to

<sup>21)</sup> G. Gurvitch, *Objet...* *op.cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>22)</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 20-21, 24.

G. Gurvitch, *Problèmes de sociologie générale*, in G. Gurvitch, *Traité...* *op.cit.*, pp. 153-251. G. Gurvitch, *Dialectique...* *op.cit.*, pp. 189-220.

<sup>23)</sup> See footnote 14.

<sup>24)</sup> G. Gurvitch, *Dialectique...* *op.cit.*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>25)</sup> A. C. Zijderfeld, *op.cit.*, p. 220 ff.

In a later article Zijderfeld developed similar ideas. Cf. A. C. Zijderfeld, « *Instituten en geschiedenis* », in *Mens en Maatschappij*, 42nd. year, n° 5, September-October 1967, pp. 391-398.

<sup>26)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184.

the following definition : « In our opinion, when reduced to its nucleus dialectical movement consists in the objectivization of « individual » actions in « structural » patterns of action (institutions, social structure), which in their turn — and this is, as it were, the dialectical reverse — influence the « individual » action or even determine it » <sup>27)</sup>. Just like Gurvitch he calls dialectic a movement and a method. However, in opposition to Gurvitch he makes less effort to encompass this infinite reciprocity within the finite observation possibility of the researcher. A dialectic of structure and individual of this nature cannot in our opinion be maintained and thus provides no useful solution to the problem. Zijderfeld is conscious of this difficulty. At the end of his book he tries to bridge the gap with reality. When the catascopic-anascopic theory is tested on empirical experience it does not appear in this pure form. In fact, on the one hand the catascopic comes to the fore while the anascopic remains in the background, and on the other hand the opposite relation between the two can be observed. Zijderfeld in the final analysis remains stuck in dualism.

Where does Zijderfeld look for the starting-points for a dialectical method ? <sup>28)</sup> In his opinion Marx's dialectic offers sufficient guarantees in order to break out of the dilemma of thought-forms : both the structure and the individual can be set off to full advantage. On the other hand, Weber's phenomenologically orientated approach can also provide a starting-point in order to distinguish between the structural and the individual in their dialectical relationship. Since the dilemma of thought-forms appears in both sociology and anthropology a solution must be found which is valid for both. How does he proceed ?

To find the solution from a marxist point of view Zijderfeld has recourse to J. P. Sartre who is no sociologist but whose views remove the dilemma. According to Sartre the marxist method is progressive and synthetic because « what is particular and individual is placed in a universal and structural totality ». The existentialist method goes further : it is progressive and regressive, synthetic and analytical. This method seeks within the structures for the individual who « creates his history in praxis » <sup>29)</sup>.

Zijderfeld finds more inspiration for the solution of the problem in W. I. Thomas (the Thomas theorem) and M. Weber. Situations observed only have a character of reality when they are so defined by individuals. On the one hand, social reality is determined by the individuals as such, but on the other hand, it is experienced by the individuals as a meaningful totality, which is their datum. The alteration of the structure of meaning, which can be both the result of the alteration of the meaning given to the individual and of that given to the whole meaningful totality, reveals clearly the dialectic. It is here that Zijderfeld finds his points of departure for dialectic.

However, in Zijderfeld's opinion Weber remains a dualist. The comparison of meaningful action with the ideal types does not express the dialectical reciprocity between individual and structure. It only gives a picture of the action of an indivi-

<sup>27)</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 186.

<sup>28)</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 193-208.

<sup>29)</sup> Zijderfeld bases his views on J. P. Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Vol. I, Paris, 1960.

dual against the background of a structure and vice versa. He considers that he can find a solution for this in Durkheim who regards the structure as an objective datum which does not depend upon individual representations. Dialectic is possible between this objective structure and the individual giving it meaning.

### 3. *The Solution of A. Schütz.*

The dilemma facing the sociologist — this is at any rate theoretically possible — Schütz approaches in an entirely different way. Gurvitch and Zijderveld do away with the dilemma as a false idea by looking for a solution in dialectic. Schütz, however, starts with the confrontation : natural sciences — social sciences <sup>30)</sup>.

If the social sciences are treated as natural sciences, Schütz argues, then inevitably we arrive at the method of behaviourism. The result of this is that we know nothing at all of the intellect of our fellow-man, so that we cannot understand why a person carries out a certain act. A behaviourist, for instance, does accept the existence of a meaningful language but not the existence of another person who gives a meaning to this language. This scientific approach leads to the creation of a fictitious picture of reality, whereas social science must describe and explain real human action.

Another approach quite simply accepts the social world with its members and institutions as a meaningful whole. The task of the investigator, according to this school of thought, is enlarged to include the description and explanation of his experiences and those of his fellow-men. Now there are some investigators who consider that it is sufficient to interpret a certain institution, group, etc. according to its meaning for the investigator without taking into consideration the opinion of other people. In this way the investigator arrives at a number of idealizations and formalizations of the social world which are not incompatible with the facts. This is, however, in Schütz opinion not the only method. It is also possible to know the meaning of the social world for the actor observed and the meaning of the act. It is possible, as it were, to try to ascertain the genesis of the idealizations and formalizations.

By this concept of social science Schütz is following along the lines of F. Znaniecki who distinguishes four schemes of reference for studying social reality, viz. social personality, social action, social group and social relationships. The last two schemes of reference he calls objective and the first two subjective. The idealizations and formalizations of both may not stand in opposition to each other or to every-day experience of the social world. From this he derives the following basic postulate of the social sciences : « Choose the scheme of reference adequate to the problem you are interested in, consider its limits and possibilities, make its terms compatible and consistent with one another and, having once accepted it, stick to it ! If, on the other hand, the ramifications of your problem lead you in the progress of your work to acceptance of other schemes of reference and interpretation, do not forget

<sup>30)</sup> A. Schütz, « The Social World and the Theory of Social Action », in A. Schütz, *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory*. The Hague, Nijhoff, 1964, pp. 3-19. Schütz had already written this article in 1940 as a reaction to T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, but published it for the first time in 1960.



that with the change in the scheme all terms in the formerly used scheme necessarily undergo a shift of meaning ».

Mindful of this postulate Schütz considers that in the construction of a theory of action the subjective point of view must be adhered to for the following reason. The subjective point of view is the only sufficient guarantee of the preservation of the world of social reality, in opposition to a fictitious, non-existent world constructed by scientific investigators which would be described from the objective point of view. In the theory of action the world is experienced as a field of action in which social things are only comprehensible as the products of my actions and of those of others. A social thing can only be understood when it is reduced to the action out of which it has arisen and to the motives which lie at the basis of the action. Thus no institution can be understood except by knowing its purpose.

It is clear from this summary that the individual-structure relationship is not solved by dialectic. Methodologically Schütz opts explicitly for the subjective approach on the basis of his definition of the object of sociology<sup>31)</sup>, viz. social action. However, he does not entirely break with the objective point of view since he clearly requires the idealizations and formalizations from both points of view not to be in contradiction to each other or to every-day experience of the world. There is thus no question either of a dialectic or of an extreme one-sidedness. The subjective point of view does exclude the objective but requires, if they are applied at the same time separately, the same results in idealizations and formalizations. Later we shall see that Schütz tries to achieve this with an ideal type. Thus in Schütz's work it is not dialectic which is to be found at the methodological level, but a negation of the individual — structure contradiction. Dialectic, of course, in the sense that it is understood by Gurvitch and Zijderveld. Later we shall discover a phenomenological concept of dialectic in his work.

#### 4. *The Solution of P. L. Berger.*

Peter L. Berger was a student of A. Schütz. That his ideas are not foreign to those of his teacher can hardly surprise us. Their ideological relationship is already shown by the definition of sociology in his work « Invitation to Sociology ». In his opinion sociology is « an attempt to understand society »<sup>32)</sup>. However, the methodological implications of this « understanding » he does not deal with in this work in much detail. The work has an entirely different purpose as the title clearly says. However, it is worth-while outlining in short his ideas because they also provide a judgment of the individual-community dilemma formulated above.

From the first sociological point of view man is considered in society. Man is here represented as a prisoner of society. Society gives everybody a position. Man is the victim of his environment, not only of his present environment but also — and perhaps to an even greater degree — of the past.

<sup>31)</sup> Schütz almost always speaks of « social science » instead of « sociology ». We think we can use the term « sociology » here as he usually uses it in his main work. The very title of this work uses the term sociology : *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt. Eine Einleitung in die verstehende Soziologie*. Vienna; Springer-Verlag, 1960 (1932).

<sup>32)</sup> P. L. Berger, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

Society is, however, not only the opponent of the individual. The individual also *accepts* society and adopts many elements of it. And this is then his second sociological perspective : « society in man ». In this way Berger describes the role theory, the sociology of knowledge and the reference group theory. Here the individual cannot, it is true, liberate himself from society but he decides to a certain extent whether he will, for instance, accept a certain role or not. The individual himself decides whether he will codefine with others a certain situation or not (cf. W. I. Thomas).

In order to free himself entirely from what he calls « sociological claustrophobia » he refers to M. Weber. In opposition to Durkheim who limits himself in his observations to regarding social reality as a « thing », Weber turns his attention above all to the intentional aspect of social action. This subjective meaning in intentional action is not, however, limited to one individual but is extended to a network of meanings given by various persons who accept a certain pattern. In the possibility the individual has of withdrawing from the meaning generally given, Berger finds an indicator of the possibility of liberation from the general constraint of society.

Thus we come back to the problem formulated above of the individual — community relationship. Berger does not speak here of an opposition but of a « paradox of social life » ; « ... that society determines us but in its turn is determined by us ». Durkheim and Weber, in his opinion, do not contradict each other but complement each other. His model is the dramatic model in which he represents social reality by analogy with a play as a transformable whole. In his view an institution is for us a datum but we can also alter it, dissociate ourselves from it or even use it for our aims <sup>33</sup>).

### *Conclusion.*

Zijderveld, although a pupil of P. L. Berger, follows along the lines of Gurvitch. It is true that he looks for points of contact with A. Schütz and Berger but finally opts for dialectic as it is to be found in Gurvitch. This dialectic is an all-destructive process. Both the apparatus of sociological concepts and the ways of methodological thought are represented as constantly changing units. Gurvitch tries to limit this infinite reciprocity. For the reasons given above we cannot, however, accept this attempt. Moreover, this dialectical mobility is not to be found in his types of the depth strata.

Dialectic, as it is defined by Gurvitch, seems to us on account of its extreme character to be a method which it would be difficult to use in order to describe and explain social reality adequately. Peter L. Berger does not deal with the methodological aspect but very clearly breaks through the opposition of nominalism to realism. « It can rightly be said that society is an objective fact which imposes a certain constraint upon us and makes us what we are. But it can just as rightly be said that our own purposeful acts « help to preserve social structure and can sometimes cooperate in changing it » <sup>34</sup>). We find a similar notion in Schütz : the activity

<sup>33</sup>) P. L. Berger, *op.cit.*, chapters 4, 5 and 6.

<sup>34</sup>) P. L. Berger, *op.cit.*, p. 137.

of the individual cannot be understood without the group and the activity of the group cannot be understood without the individual. Methodologically, however, he calls for the subjective approach, but on the other hand he leaves, as was pointed out earlier, an opening for the objective approach.

To give a synthesis the following table can be drawn up which contains the theoretically possible approaches to the person-community relationship both sociologically and methodologically <sup>35)</sup>).

Table I

Theoretically Possible Approaches to the Person-Community Relationship from the Sociological and Methodological Points of View.

| Person | Community |     |
|--------|-----------|-----|
|        | Yes       | No  |
| Yes    | I         | III |
| No     | II        | IV  |

Durkheim would fall sociologically and methodologically into category II. M. Weber and A. Schütz from a methodological point of view can be placed in category III but from a sociological point of view they belong to category I. P. L. Berger together with G. Gurvitch and A. Zijderveld on a sociological level opt for the solution of category I, while the latter two extend this option to the methodological level. Category IV does come within the theoretical possibilities but it has no importance for the social sciences because the object of the social sciences is not involved. On the basis of this analysis and relying on insight gained from our every-day experience our sociological approach concurs with that of those who are of the opinion that both the person and the community must be taken into consideration in order to understand and explain social reality. The methodological consequences of this decision must be gone into further.

## II. Towards an Understanding and Explanation of Social Action.

### 1. *Understanding (« verstehen ») : An Invalid Method ?*

Positivism and « understanding » are sometimes called two different camps. S. Strasser, however, characterizes their relationship in a broader way. He opposes the « scientific » to the « existentialists » and considers that the solution to this op-

<sup>35)</sup> In the future we shall speak of « person » when we mean the spiritual and corporeal unity of a man, and of « community » when we mean any collective phenomenon consisting of persons.

position can be found in phenomenology. The « scientific » stress empiric experience in anthropology and orientate this towards physics as a model science <sup>36)</sup>. The « existentialists » reject empirical experience, call their method « phenomenological » and base themselves above all upon « suggestive descriptions of a few carefully chosen human experiences » <sup>37)</sup>. Strasser considers that the two parties have never come any closer to each other. He looks for a solution in another way. More of that later.

E. Leemans in his turn also tries to break through the task of discovering « the meaningful regularity which can be found within a given social system in the reciprocal relationship of the social and the cultural structures ». He appeals for « an understanding of what is objectively observed ». But he points out that he does not in the least mean an « understanding method conceived as vague phenomenological or subjective introspection ». He means that « ...in the investigation, on account of the representative random sample within the social system in question, sociological understanding becomes in a certain sense a collective and hence also objectivizing understanding (« verstehen ») » <sup>38)</sup>. The question which we must pose is now : does this sociological understanding not in fact form subjective introspection even though Leemans places this on the collective level ? Does not the technique of the random sample in the final analysis have recourse to subjective introspection ? The random sample, it is true, is a reduced picture of the universe under study but this random sample is after all analyzed by means of information obtained by the individuals from the random sample which their own attitude and behaviour interpret according to their own insight. The diverse insights can indeed be united into a number of categories but this does not in any way alter the subjectivity of the point of departure. In the final analysis an appeal is still made to the subjective introspection of those questioned.

A question which is of a rather philosophical nature concerns the possibility that the objectivity of the « understanding » is determined by the collectivity. In order to throw some light on this problem we must refer to the ideas of S. Strasser about objectivity. Strasser begins by treating objectivity as a human attitude, i.e. « the recognition by a free man that he is dependent upon and regulated by something which he is not ». It is from this objectivity as a human attitude that what is objective comes to exist for us, i.e. « what is necessary and generally valid for us ». Something is only objective when we have recognized it as really existing. Thus a thing is always objective for us but not through us since what we experience as real is not brought into existence by us <sup>39)</sup>. In accordance with this reasoning the conclusion is reached that « understanding » does not become objective by means of the collectivity but that this « understanding » becomes objective for us when we have experienced the social system as real. Only when the collectivity has experienced

<sup>36)</sup> S. Strasser, *Fenomenologie en empirische menskunde*. Arnhem, Van Loghum Slaterus, 1965, p. 35.

<sup>37)</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>38)</sup> E. J. Leemans, *Op de drempel van de sociologie*. Nijmegen-Utrecht, Dekker & Van de Vegt, N.V. 1960, pp. 13-14.

<sup>39)</sup> S. Strasser, *op.cit.*, p. 89.

something as real is that objective for it. Whether or not « understanding » is objective thus does not depend upon the collectivity. When applied to the random sample this leads to the following conclusion : what those interviewed express is what is for them objective and not what is objective for others — provided at least that the person questioned has no reason for concealing this.

So far we have approached the problem from the point of view of the subject interviewed. However, for Leemans it is a question of sociological understanding by the sociologist. Can the sociologist only come to an objective understanding by starting with a collective understanding on the basis of a representative random sample ? According to the ideas of A. Schütz, the sociologist will never come to a collective understanding. What he does understand is social reality. To do so he has recourse to ideal types which are unchangeable, anonymous thought-constructions which are rationally built up in order to explain a certain action. These ideal types are constructed on the basis of environmental («umweltliche») experience which is given directly to the researcher but which he cannot use because he, as a scientist, only approaches the Other as a cowlorld (« Mitwelt ») where there can be no question of the experience of the behaviour of the Other. He can only know the Others via the ideal types which he assigns to them. These ideal types are constructions which are built upon the basis of what the researcher experiences, i.e. they are objective for him but not through him <sup>40</sup>). In Schütz's case there is no question of « collective understanding » in order to come to objective understanding. He does however, come to an understanding of collective action, which is what sociology is about. This collective action appears to the sociologist as an objective datum which does not come into existence through him but becomes known through him.

Another opponent of « understanding » is A. D. De Groot. He does not reject « understanding » but considers that this method can only be used in the formation of hypotheses. According to De Groot the « understanding » method is no alternative to a scientific methodology, it forms only a part of it. It only has the value of an exploratory aid in the construction of hypotheses <sup>41</sup>).

A. Schütz assigns a much more important task to « understanding ». The ideal types which are brought into existence in the « understanding » method do not merely describe, they also explain. This he uses to the full by including motives in the construction of the ideal types <sup>42</sup>).

When De Groot approaches the problems of the uniqueness of the objects studied in the humanities he comes to a similar conclusion as A. Schütz. In the conception of Schütz the ideal type gives a picture of the activity of every individual in complete

<sup>40</sup>) A. Schütz, « Common Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action », in A. Schütz, *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality*. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, pp. 3-47 especially pp. 34-47.

<sup>41</sup>) A. D. De Groot, *Methodologie. Grondslagen van onderzoek en denken in de gedragswetenschap*. The Hague, Mouton en Co., 1961, pp. 59-60. De Groot bases his ideas principally on the works of W. Dilthey, E. Spranger and K. Jaspers and does not refer to any work by M. Weber or A. Schütz.

<sup>42</sup>) J. Verhoeven, *De sociologische verklaring... op.cit.*, p. 124. For more details see A. Schütz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau... op.cit.*, pp. 93-105.

anonymity<sup>43)</sup>. They thus give laws. De Groot accepts also that in « understanding » we have more extensive pronouncements than purely individual ones but he considers that we do not come to laws but at most to the formation of « implicit theories or hypotheses »<sup>44)</sup>.

C. Hempel's investigation into the meaning of ideal types in natural sciences and social sciences gives the same results as the objections of De Groot<sup>45)</sup>. Via M. Weber Hempel comes to the conclusion that in fact the ideal type is no concept but a theory, at least if the intention of the constructor of the type is taken into consideration. And this is the intention of Schütz. However, according to him the ideal type can also explain<sup>46)</sup>. If this is so, Hempel says, then Weber cannot restrict his explanatory principles in sociology to « meaningful rules of comprehensible behaviour », for there are many elements which can help to explain but which have no subjective meaning. To omit these is, in Hempel's opinion, an unscientific restriction placed upon sociology. Behaviourism has, moreover, already revealed these possibilities. However, Schütz rejects behaviourism.

If these ideal types do not fulfil a function as theories, then at least they have in Hempel's view a heuristic value: they help to formulate hypotheses which must always be tested empirically.

In Hempel's conception the ideal types must always be applied in the same manner in both sociology and physics. Thus, firstly, the ideal types must be more of theories than concepts, i.e. an ensemble of characteristics and a number of hypotheses which bind these characteristics together. Secondly, if an ideal type does not function in hypotheses of the type « if P, then Q », then the ideal type does not explain. Thirdly, only if the ensemble of the hypotheses consists of theoretical rather than intuitive idealizations, i.e. if they, within the framework of a theory, are deducible as special cases of more comprehensive principles, can the ensemble of hypotheses be regarded as an ideal system.

G. Gurvitch speaks of a typological method which generalizes but which on the other hand also takes specifics into consideration. This method assumes in advance « the comprehension of the ensembles and of their meanings ». This, however, does not have anything to do with « understanding » as Weber or Schütz would use the term. Gurvitch rejects Weber's ideal types as « utopian rationalizations »<sup>47)</sup>. In addition he also rejects the idea that phenomenology, like other philosophical schools of thought, could have any influence on the method of depth sociology<sup>48)</sup>.

<sup>43)</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 277-279.

<sup>44)</sup> A. D. De Groot, *op.cit.*, pp. 363-366.

<sup>45)</sup> C. G. Hempel, « Typological Methods in the Natural and Social Sciences », in C. G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*. New York, The Free Press, 1965, pp. 155-171.

<sup>46)</sup> Hempel does not, however, deal with A. Schütz.

<sup>47)</sup> G. Gurvitch, *Traité de sociologie I*, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

G. Gurvitch, *La vocation actuelle de la sociologie. I*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1963, pp. 13, 54.

<sup>48)</sup> G. Gurvitch, *La vocation...* *op.cit.*, p. 68. « It is even necessary to renounce the idea of asking for the patronage of methods such as « inversion » or « phenomenological reduction », since sociology, like science, must not be tied up with any particular philosophical orientation.

## 2. « Understanding » (« verstehen ») : an Accepted Method ?

It would be possible to continue with the above list of opponents of « understanding » and thus look for various arguments with which to reject it. We could also advance to the bridge from natural sciences to social sciences such as C. Hempel built. But we can also look for some positive arguments in order to give « understanding » its own place in sociology. For this we must refer to the phenomenologist S. Strasser.

For Strasser « understanding » can assume three forms, viz. prescientific intuition, hypothesis or interpretation, and view. Intuition is the cognitive attitude which believes that things are what they are seen to be. It is an immediate cognition which is based neither upon induction or upon deduction. It occurs without critical reflection <sup>49</sup>). Intuition is the starting point of all experimental sciences which « includes the critical selection, completion and assimilation of the intuitive data ». According to Strasser it is thus useful for the practioners of anthropological sciences to make certain that the behaviour and expression of men is what it is seen to be. This prescientific intuition or comprehension thus provides no guarantee of truth but it is a starting-point for further investigation <sup>50</sup>).

A second form of « understanding » is to be found in the anticipatory interpretation (hypothesis) of the actual interpretation. An hypothesis arises from an « understanding interpretation of a still prescientific problem ». This prescientific problem proceeds from « pre-experimental » experience which is coupled with comprehension <sup>51</sup>). In this way « understanding » appears in the work of the psychologist and sociologist, while for the historian it takes the form of understanding interpretation.

The third form in which « understanding » is to be found is view. A view arises from existing knowledge ; it is an understanding of scientific methods and their results. Frequently a new method is connected with this. The fruitfulness of the view depends upon its results and only the history of the opinion can teach us this ; the question is whether it teaches a better understanding of man. Comprehension consists partly of a comprehension of the ways in which men see what is human. It is not sufficient to know if a certain behaviour exists, how often it occurs, how it proceeds. It is also necessary to know how men see it who behave in such and such a way. Comprehension is also the seeing of a connection between the facts which occur at first contact as separate facts <sup>52</sup>).

This view is absolutely necessary in anthropology. Anthropology approaches reality from a certain standpoint and the selection of this standpoint is not based upon empiric experience but upon a view which is tied to a certain « superempirical conviction ». Whether social behaviour is a purely physical ensemble of movements, or whether it is the meaningful action of somebody fulfilling a role depends upon a view. For Strasser every view in anthropology is a metaphysical view, and this metaphysical view includes the search by man for the meaning of his existence in

<sup>49</sup>) S. Strasser, *op.cit.*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>50</sup>) *Ibidem*, pp. 163-166.

<sup>51</sup>) *Ibidem*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>52</sup>) *Ibidem*, pp. 174-182.

the world <sup>53</sup>). On the basis of these considerations Strasser considers that in anthropology cooperation is necessary between philosopher and scientist <sup>54</sup>). The findings of the philosopher can fertilize the experience of the scientist and vice versa.

According to Strasser phenomenology is the philosophy which must help empirical anthropology. Phenomenology helps to elevate empirical anthropology, i.e. to negate, to preserve and to raise. By means of phenomenology the anthropologist is directed to what he really experiences and what he knows only hypothetically. This must be applied at the point of departure which must be real experience and not imagination. The investigation itself must always be directed to what has been experienced. On the other hand phenomenology helps to preserve what is, i.e. the scientific apparatus must be preserved as it is, and empirical experience must remain empirical experience. But one thing does change : the attitude of the investigator to the man under investigation. And in the final instance to elevate means to raise. This takes place in anthropology in the view. This can be explicit or implicit, mostly the latter. Strasser considers that the view can best be expressed by the phenomenological philosopher because his philosophy is a « fundamental philosophy of human existence ». This philosophy reproduces the meaning, aims, values of everything appertaining to man <sup>55</sup>).

In Schütz's case too phenomenology forms the point of departure, Already in Max Weber he finds the idea of arriving at an understanding of social relations and structures solely based upon the individual whose activity is understandable <sup>56</sup>). This view of Max Weber he has based phenomenologically. On the basis of the phenomenological observation of the environment (« Umwelt ») he constructs a method which will allow the sociologist to understand the coworld (« Mitwelt ») and the preworld (« Vorwelt »). The understanding of the Other in his environment (« Umwelt ») (« Fremdverstehen ») is also based phenomenologically by Schütz on the explanation of one's own self by him who is trying to understand the Other. Thus in Schütz's conception the observer must project the aim of the action of the Other as though he himself would make the action and invent on this basis the further course of his action <sup>57</sup>).

In opposition to Strasser who sees « understanding » within sciences as a view of the scientific results and methods, for A. Schütz « understanding » is a method in itself. « Understanding » will according to Schütz, not only describe what has been experienced but also explain it.

### 3. « Understanding » : a Dialectical Method ?

At the beginning of this article Gurvitch's special conception of dialectic was pointed out and at the same time the connection between Zijderveld and Gurvitch was emphasized. On the other hand, it was also made clear that A. Schütz methodologi-

<sup>53</sup>) *Ibidem*, pp. 203-207.

<sup>54</sup>) *Ibidem*, p. 223.

<sup>55</sup>) *Ibidem*, pp. 294-299.

<sup>56</sup>) A. Schütz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau...*, op.cit., p. 3.

<sup>57</sup>) *Ibidem*, pp. 124-128.



cally opts for a subjectivist approach and rejects dialectic methodologically. However, the question can now be put whether he rejects every form of dialectic or whether there is room for a form of dialectic within the « understanding » method which he has developed.

If we were to proceed from the proposition of A. C. Zijderveld, who maintains that in order to obtain an adequate social-scientific theory it is necessary to take as a starting-point the Thomas theorem and Marx's dialectical thesis<sup>58</sup>), then we cannot conclude that dialectic is lacking in Schütz's sociology. Two questions will make this clear : « We work and operate not only with but upon the world »<sup>59</sup>) and « ...objects among which we move, which resist us and upon which we may act »<sup>60</sup>). Schütz thus does seem to distinguish dialectic within social reality as will be shown below by other examples. However, the question remains open whether he has also made it possible to approach this social reality dialectically. This will be dealt with later on. The first form of dialectic is found in the every-day construction of images of myself and the other. The image which I form of myself is determined by the image which I form of the Other, and vice versa. By assigning a role to the Other I assign myself my own role. And further : « We have, however, to keep in mind that the common-sense constructs used of the typification of the Other and of myself are to a considerable extent socially derived and socially approved. Within the in-group the bulk of personal types and course-of-action types is taken for granted... as a set of rules and recipes which have stood the test so far and are expected to stand it in the future. Even more, the pattern of typical constructs is frequently institutionalized as a standard of behavior, warranted by traditional and habitual mores and sometimes by specific means of so-called social control, such as the legal order »<sup>61</sup>).

A second form can be perceived at the level of rational action where there exists interaction between persons. The personality and action types are viewed by me and by my fellow-man as data. Here lies the possibility that I will arrive at « intersubjective behaviour »<sup>62</sup>). It should here be noted that Schütz nevertheless does not speak of a dialectic. In fact he almost never uses that word in his work.

Reasoning from the actor's point of view Schütz discovers two sorts of motives, in-order-to-motives and because-motives. The former points to the actor's own decisions, the latter to an external influence which caused the actor to act as he did. Only an action in the past enables us to discern that the social environment causes somebody to act in accordance with a definite pattern. Thus a because-motive can only affect the actor in the form of a project<sup>63</sup>).

<sup>58</sup>) A. C. Zijderveld, *op.cit.*, p. 205.

W. I. Thomas : « If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences ». K. Marx : « ...that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances ».

<sup>59</sup>) A. Schütz, « On Multiple Realities », in A. Schütz, *Collected Papers I*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, p. 209.

<sup>60</sup>) A. Schütz, « Common Sense... » *op.cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup>) *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>62</sup>) *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>63</sup>) *Ibidem*, pp. 21-22.

A. Schütz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau...* *op.cit.*, pp. 93-105.

A. Schütz, « Choosing among Projects of Actions », in A. Schütz, *Collected Papers, I*. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, pp. 69-72.

Dialectic within social reality is also to be found in social structure. This structure is a datum for me which is necessary for my contact with others. Language is a good example of this. « Socialized structure gives knowledge an objective and anonymous character : it is regarded as independent of my personal biographical circumstances ». What is typical is a datum for me <sup>64</sup>). Social structure thus has an important influence on human behaviour.

Having used A. C. Zijderveld's conception of dialectic as our starting-point we now intend to proceed to a more formal point of view. Schütz calls himself a phenomenologist and in fact does go to work in a phenomenological way. We now intend to supplement these views with S. Strasser's exposition of phenomenology in order to be able to show the dialectical character of Schütz's sociology <sup>65</sup>).

In Strasser's opinion phenomenological philosophy has a hermeneutic, intuitive and dialectical character. The hermeneutic cognitive attitude consists in the fact that the philosopher views his own existence as a prior datum and knows that he as a social being is tied to the Other and basing himself on this attitude seeks for « the essential structures of this existence » and at the same time tries to comprehend « their metaphysical meaning ». Intuition, which is also called observation, is « the cognitive act which corresponds to the evident being of the really existing ». Obvious is what can be immediately observed. To observe includes both « to see » and « to comprehend ». The consequence of this is that what is « obvious » « cannot be proved » and « does not need to be proved ». This form of observation is, however, not a definitive and absolute form of observation but a concatenation of cognitives acts. This intuition is supplemented by a dialectic, i.e. « every ordered change of standpoint... which allows man seeking for meaning to remove systematically one-sided perspectives and limiting horizons ».

This dialectical movement is also to be found in Schütz. He starts with the examination of his own situation and from there arrives at a knowledge of the Other. This knowledge is, however, in Schütz's opinion limited, since the actor can only discover himself the actual meaning of his action. In order to penetrate to the Other he has recourse to types of interaction and motives. In this experience of the Other Schütz devalues the intersubjectivity of the world. Since the world is intersubjective our knowledge of this world is socialized. This is, however, only possible when the standpoint can be interchanged and the relevance systems can be made congruent ; and these operations in their turn must be idealized because they may not be constructed from out of a definite situation where the standpoints and relevances would again vary <sup>66</sup>). In our opinion the dialectical approach to social reality by Schütz lies in the acceptance of the principle of the reciprocity of the perspectives. By the interchange of the standpoints the observer is able to know the experience the Other has of reality. Here there is a danger of subjectivism because the observer always

<sup>64</sup>) *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>65</sup>) S. Strasser, *op.cit.*, pp. 239-251.

<sup>66</sup>) A. Schütz, « Common Sense... » *op.cit.*, pp. 10-11.

A. Schütz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau...* *op.cit.*, p. 126. We can thus see that in 1953, the date of the former article, Schütz was still defending the same view that he had had in 1932 when the book first appeared.

sees reality from out of a situation. In order to avoid this subjectivism Schütz considers it is necessary in the social sciences, which are striving for a knowledge of social reality, to have recourse to ideal types which a neutral researcher construes from the actions of the Others. The sociologist in fact does not arrive at immediate knowledge of the Other. The Other belongs to the « coworld » (« Mitwelt ») of the sociologist, not to his « environment » (« Umwelt »). In order to know the action of the Other we must, in Schütz's opinion, project the aim of the Other's action as our own action and then imagine the course of our action. The postulate of adequacy which requires that scientific models be adequate to the constructions of every-day life made by the actor and his fellow-man implies that scientific constructions must also satisfy the requirements of every-day constructions<sup>67</sup>). The principles of the interchangeability of the standpoints and the congruence of the relevance systems thus find their application in the construction of scientific types. Consequently the sociologist in the construction of his ideal types must not take up a one-sided standpoint but by a constant change of standpoint must arrive at an ideal type of human action.

There is, however, a difficulty in this reasoning. The postulate of adequacy is in fact a *deus ex machina* : on the one hand, Schütz ascertains that the actor is able to know his « environment », and on the other hand he remarks that the sociologist only knows his « coworld » (« Mitwelt ») and can never know his « environment » (« Umwelt »). In order to know his fellow-man the sociologist constructs ideal types and in accordance with the adequacy postulate these ideal types must be understandable for the actor, who is comprised in the ideal type, and for his fellow-man. The problem is now : how can the sociologist who can only approach the Other as a fellow-man know whether the ideal types are understandable for the actor and his fellow-man ? It seems to us that Schütz is here assigning a double role to the sociologist, namely those of scientist and of actor in the world. This latter social role then provides the possibility of testing the correctness of the construction of the ideal type because only the actor can meet the Other as fellow-man, and can thus see whether the ideal type is understandable for actor and fellow-man.

By means of the postulate of adequacy Schütz thus indirectly brings dialectic methodologically into his « understanding » sociology : by this postulate the interchangeability of the standpoints is introduced from the constructions in every-day experience into scientific constructions. The sociologist does not arrive at a knowledge of the « environment » (« Umwelt ») but of the « coworld » (« Mitwelt ») of which the truth value is determined solely by the « environment » (« Umwelt »). This environment (« Umwelt ») is only known by the sociologist when he approaches it as a participant. It must, however, be noted that Schütz never speaks of dialectic in this sense.

<sup>67</sup>) A. Schütz, *The Problem of Rationality in the Social World*, in A. Schütz, *Collected Papers*, II ; The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1964, pp. 85-6.

#### 4. *Sociology: Definition and Methodological Consequences.*

At the end of the first section the idea was defended that both structure and person must aid in the explanation of social reality. A. Schütz was represented as an advocate of this starting-point but methodologically he started only with the person. The explanation of social action can only be attained in his view via the individual who for the sociologist is only a datum as an homunculus. But it is precisely in this type construction that Schütz finds the possibility of avoiding subjectivism which threatens his point of departure. In order to construct these ideal types recourse is had to « understanding » (« verstehen »). A number of arguments have been given for and against this as well as for and against the dialectical qualities of « understanding » which is analyzed phenomenologically by Schütz. On the basis of these considerations the following pages will be devoted to a description of the concept of sociology and the methodological approach which results from this.

Sociology is an empirical science which has human action as its object. It in no way is different in this from the other social sciences. Gurvitch considers that this problem can only find a solution in methodology and Schütz in fact provides no solution for this unless his teaching on forms is accepted <sup>68</sup>). Schütz, moreover, applies the « understanding » method to all the social sciences. Thus it must still be shown what the specific domain of sociology is. It is the formal standpoint, viz. that the sociologist studies action to the extent that it is social and to the extent that that action is an action *with* or *amongst* Others. This limitation does not, for example, exclude the economic activity of merchants as an object of sociological analysis. However, the sociologist will restrict himself to the study of the economic activity of merchants to the extent that this activity is a social activity, while the economist will study this activity from the point of view of economics. Economic activity can also be social activity, but it is not necessarily so. Every action can be social but it can also be, for example, economic. It can only be observed in the past ; it can also proceed according to laws, etc. It is only action as a social phenomenon that is the object of sociology. This action can proceed economically, historically, legally etc., but these characteristics do not constitute the social aspect of action. Action is social even when it does not proceed according to economic principles, even when it does not take place in the past, even when it does not proceed in accordance with a positive law.

Why is social action put forward as the object of sociology ? Schütz starts with the experience of his own person and arrives via this way at the experience of his « environment » (« Umwelt »). However, I do not experience myself in isolation from others but I experience the Others as a datum. This experience of the Other comes to its full development in work. This work is a form of action in which I experience the world as a datum, but also as a task. Within this action I meet the Others who react to my action and thus express their communication with me. They experience my action as meaningful. Phenomenologically Schütz arrives at social and meaningful action which is the object of sociology, for Schütz is of the

<sup>68</sup>) A. Schütz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau...* op.cit., p. 227.

opinion that the sociologist must study the behaviour of men as he experiences this in daily life. That this gives rise to a number of difficulties for the sociologist has already been described. Schütz bases the solution, which he looks for in the ideal type in order to know the « coworld » (« Mitwelt ») and its consequent testing on the « environment » (« Umwelt »), on a postulate (the adequacy postulate). The sociologist cannot, if he is to remain scientific, have recourse, in Schütz's opinion, to direct experience of the « coworld ». We shall leave this problem on one side. For us it is Schütz's phenomenological observation which is of importance in order to define the object of sociology : I experience my action and the action of Others as meaningful. Social meaningful action is thus our first experiential datum ; it is a datum for the phenomenologist which cannot or must not be proved.

In the same way as social action appears for the observer, so also the structure of that social action and of the values which govern that action, in other words the culture, appears for the observer. They are not brought into being by the observer but they do exist for him. These structural data are indeed carried by the individual acting persons but they remain outside of them. By the disappearance of a person a certain structure does not disappear. It is, for example, not necessary that when director X retires from business, the structure of the business disappears. It is, for example, not necessary that with the disappearance of vicar X the faith of his parishioners will change. Both the structure of the social action and that of its meaning appear as experiential data.

The choice of social action as the object of sociology thus runs along the lines of Schütz's thought. He is of the opinion that sociology must study social reality as it is experienced every day by people. Phenomenological observation has taught that man most strongly experiences his social dimension in activity in which he arrives at meaningful communication with Others. How people experience their social action the sociologist must show. Therefore the sociologist must not only have recourse to the group in order to understand or to explain social action, but also to the person. By this, however, we do not mean the person with his psychological qualities but the person as bearer of social characteristics. Thus, for instance, person X with his psychological qualities is not an object of sociological investigation ; but person X as the bearer of role A in group B is indeed of interest to the sociologist. To leave the person outside the explanation would be to reduce considerably insight into social action. Let us take the following example. A certain group has a different expectation of the task of the group than its leader. This leadership post is an assigned post to which the group makes the appointment. At the moment of the selection of the leader there may well exist a consensus of agreement between the group and the leader about the aim of the group. Subsequently, however, the leader can free himself from this and guide the group in another direction. The tensions resulting from this could not be explained if the person of the leader who has freed himself from the expectations of the group is not taken into consideration. The social action of the group and the leader is thus not only determined by the group but also by the leader himself. In this case the leader's position is, it is true, a structural datum, but the interpretation which determines the social action of the group is the personal interpretation of the leader.

In the selection of these ways of explaining social action the methodological starting-point has already been defined. For Schütz the only possible way was via the individual who was able to experience his own action. Nevertheless, in his conception the sociologist was not able to penetrate through into the experience of the Other except by constructing ideal types. However, this reasoning we cannot completely accept because it restricts the possibilities of the sociologist and excludes the experiences of the Others except via ideal types, and on the other hand it posits experience as the criterion for testing the validity of the ideal types. In fact the question whether we can only know the truth of social action via ideal types is an epistemological question. To answer this in Strasser's terms would lead to a rather negative answer. The phenomenological philosopher does not reject the value of empirical experience for anthropology; neither does he reject the former investigation techniques. The phenomenologist only changes the attitude of the investigator to the object under investigation : social action<sup>69</sup>). Social action is meaningful action and must also be studied as such. That this meaningful action must be approached both via the person and via the group we shall now deal with in more detail. First an example.

In planning a sociological investigation the sociologist starts with a certain view of himself and of the Other. He experiences himself in a meaningful intersubjective world. He will thus also have to use those instruments which will allow him to comprehend the meaning of the action of the Others. However, he will first have to define his field of investigation from his view of the world. Once he has defined his field of investigation and has decided that he will use the interview as his means of observation, what happens then ? In the first place, it is clear to us that the interview will not provide the sociologist with more information about the problem in question than he himself has put into it and that he cannot explain more by it than what he himself has explained on the basis of his prior insight. The investigator must know in advance what he considers makes up the essential component parts of the social action studied and he must also know what can be advanced for the explanation of the social action. For this the sociologist can have recourse to the theoretical constructions which form the essence of the phenomenon studied and which have consequently attained a certain degree of anonymity. This is for the sociologist a datum. Once he has this instrument he can proceed to observe. He can observe social action directly in the group, but in most cases he will have to address himself to persons. In this latter case every person has the chance to describe his situation and the social action as he experiences it. In this way each person can describe and explain reality from his own point of view. These various points of view are expressed in the descriptions of the individual positions of the persons within a given structure and culture, such as, for example : the place within a professional structure ; the religious and political values to which a person adheres, etc. This is the dialectical approach of « understanding ». In this case this is not « understanding » by the sociologist by means of an ideal type but dialectical « understanding » by the persons who themselves are acting.

<sup>69</sup>) S. Strasser, *op.cit.*, pp. 297-298.

At the basis of the elaboration of this example lies the idea that social reality is something really existing which does not coincide with the individual persons but does presuppose them as constituent component parts. A group is only a group to the extent that it has members. And this group can only be structured and be the carrier of a certain culture to the extent that there are members who carry this structure. A social structure which is not carried by persons at the moment of observation belongs to history. A business, the structure of which is known but which does not employ any workers, clerks or members of the management, is no longer a business. This does not mean that the sociologist cannot include this type of social action within his field of study. On the contrary. However, the possibilities for his knowledge of it are very limited because the sources are more restricted than in the case of a structure which still exists.

How does the sociologist arrive at an understanding and explanation of social action? For the investigator it is not of importance how he himself experiences the social action but how the social action is experienced by the Others. The Others experience themselves in an intersubjective and cultural world which is for them a datum, but also a task. Social reality exists even before they existed and they experience it as structured. From their own situations all these people will turn to the social action which must be understood and explained. This is important for the sociologist because he wants to know the social action from the individual situation-descriptions of the group-members who compose this action or who must give a judgment about it. In fact it will be the case that the person interviewed will not describe his own situation unless explicitly invited to do so by the investigator. In sociological investigations this can take on various forms. By participating the investigator can directly experience the situation of the Other. In a study of sources he can only restrict himself to the detection of the situation of the compiler of the source which is relevant for the judgment of the source. Thus it is important to know whether the description of the structure of a business comes from a director, a worker, a sociologist etc., because these people all approach that business from a different point of view. In the interviews which we divide representatively throughout a defined universe, this determination of the situation is an even greater problem. In the final analysis, the definition of the situation is completely dependent upon the possibilities which the investigator allows to the person interviewed. In actual fact this means that the sociologist must include questions which must allow or force the person interviewed to define his situation within the social structure and culture. What the person interviewed takes as being important structural and cultural data thus depends upon the sociologist. That this is not without consequences for the explanation of the social action studied is beyond doubt. This will be made clearer later. At this point it is important how the sociologist offers the person interviewed the practical possibility of describing his social situation. Here the investigator is directly forced to have recourse to theoretical constructions which, because they reproduce the essence of a definite situation, can be unambiguously understood by the persons interviewed. It is obvious that it is not always necessary to follow the method of the ideal type. We do not wish to deal with the construction of this once again. For this reference should be made to the work of A. Schütz.

What is important is the fact that those interviewed should have the chance of defining their situation. However, the number of structural and cultural data is always limited. Whether or not he is independent, to which definite age category and sex he belongs, whether or not he is married, whether or not he has children, all reproduce something of the situation of a person within a definite group, but they can never describe the entire social situation from which he approaches the social action. How the person interviewed experiences this situation is mostly not given.

The possibility the sociologist has of determining the situation descriptions of the persons interviewed leads us directly to questions about the explanation. For if, for instance, the sociologist only introduces five structural data he can only understand the meaning of the social action as it has been described from the point of view of these five different structures either separately or in combination. It is also possible to determine which of the five is the main determinant in a certain action or which are of equal significance. Apart from these five structural data nothing is known of the social situation of the universe studied. Empirically it is, at most, possible to determine the sequence of the five structural data. This example makes it to a certain extent clear that the explanation of the social action has in fact already been given before the systematic observation was begun. The sociologist directs his observation to what he considers of importance in order to explain the social action. For this he needs a certain conception of the object he is studying as well as of the social determinants which can explain that object. This boils down to what Strasser calls « understanding » as anticipatory interpretation. The sociologist must in fact already have formed an ideal type of the social action studied, by which he understands and explains it in order to make this operational in a questionnaire or some other means of observation. The explanation thus clearly precedes the collection of data. The determination whether or not the explanation is correct follows the collection of data.

In opposition to De Groot who only allows « understanding » to play a role in the formation of hypotheses, for A. Schütz « understanding » is a separate, valid method. In our opinion « understanding » is possible by means of an ideal type. However, it is tested by the systematic collection of data, in sociology frequently in the form of a poll conducted with a representative sample.

Since the sociologist wants to know social action as it is understood by those who are doing it, he must know from which situation the universe studied judges its action. This is of prime importance for the explanation of the social action. We have already referred to the selection which the investigator makes of the possibilities which the members of the group studied are given in order to describe their situation. This selection is made on the basis of the relevance which a certain situation can have for the social action studied. Thus membership of a sports club is less relevant to the educational activities of a father than the fact that he is a member of the parents' association of a school. In any case there is a great chance that the pedagogic activity of those fathers who are members of a sports club will be different to that of those who are members of a parents' association. The situation description is thus selective depending upon the relevance of the situation. Once again this means a preceding

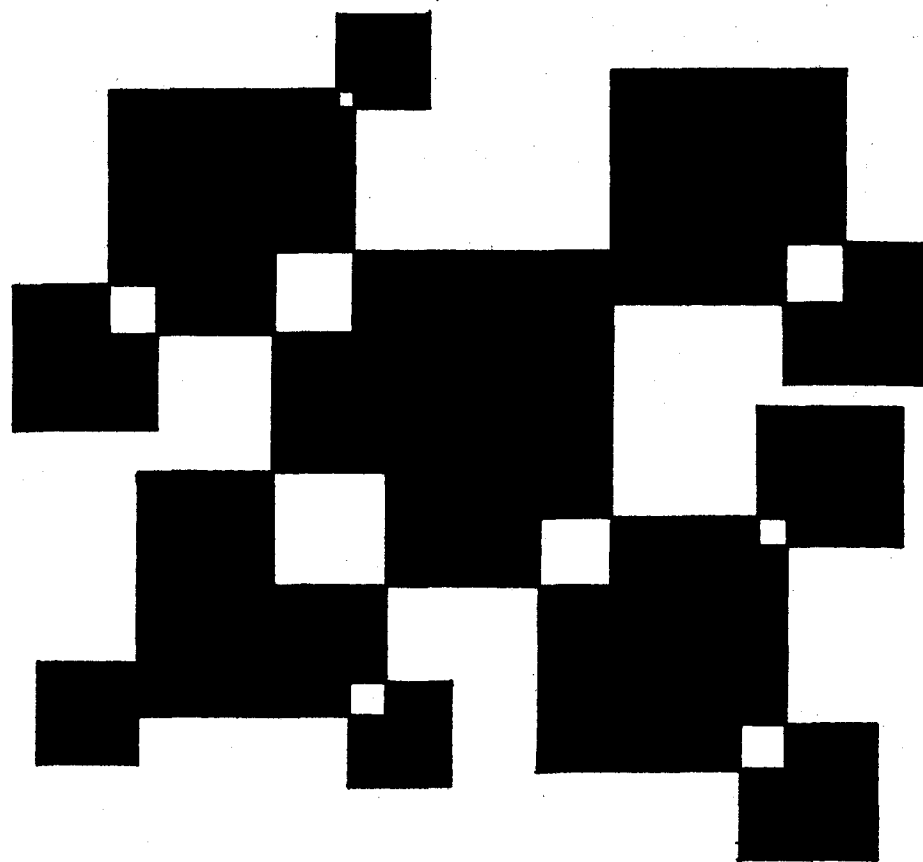


limitation of the explanation. Systematic observation does not permit any extension of the situation description. By means of it it is never possible to know what is the most important situation for the explanation of a certain phenomenon, but it is possible to determine the most important of the systematically collected situations of the people interviewed, if all of them are not equally important or if a number are not equally important.

A second limitation on the description of the situations is that the investigator never knows precisely how those interviewed experience their situation. He can construct an ideal type for this in which individual experience gives way to common experience. However, in most cases — unless he has included a check for this in his investigation — the investigator has no guarantee of an exactly similar experience by each of those interviewed. But there is a chance that he will understand the situation description identically.

We shall conclude with a short summary of the dialectical character of the comprehension and explanation of social action. Formerly G. Gurvitch's dialectic was abandoned for phenomenological dialectic. The sociologist studies social reality as this is experienced by people. This experience varies according to the point of view adopted, by which the perspective is constantly altered and new facets of what has been observed are continually appearing. Dialectical comprehension and explanation consist precisely in this. The sociologist must thus approach reality from the various points of view which are connected with the different situations. A strike cannot be understood or explained if the differing situations of employer and employee are not taken into consideration. One-sided observation of the strike phenomenon would only be able to give a false picture.

In the elaboration of methodological principles which must guide the study of social action a number of new limitations on sociology have been introduced. Social action must not merely be understood and explained from only one point of view, be it geographical, physiological, psychological or economic, but on the basis of the social structure and culture in which people act. These two factors are the data in which the sociologist must place social action. But this social structure and this culture do not consist of people but exist for people. The significance of social action is found by people in social structure and culture although this does not exclude the influence of man upon both. In this way sociology is to be seen as the science which studies social action as it appears within a given social structure and culture and which is also understood and explained on the basis of them.



# **sociological contributions from flanders 1969-1970**

**uitgeverij de nederlandsche boekhandel**

# Contents

|                                 |   |         |
|---------------------------------|---|---------|
| CREYF, R.                       | The role model in the sociological explanation of the phenomenon of illness             | 4- 13   |
| DE CLERCQ, B. J.                | Liturgical community :<br>Sociological or religious community ?                         | 14- 25  |
| DEWACHTER, W.                   | The primaries to the Belgian parliamentary elections                                    | 26- 36  |
| DUMON, W. A.                    | Early and enforced marriages : a study on a marginal group of young families in Belgium | 37- 43  |
| GEVERS, P.                      | Works Councils in Belgium   | 44- 56  |
| LEHOUCK, F.                     | Social policy and theory  | 57- 78  |
| SANTY, H.                       | The Priest and his Task in the Church :<br>A Sociological Approach                      | 79- 90  |
| VAN DE KERCKHOVE, J.            | Pluralist Society in New Perspective  | 91- 99  |
| VAN HOUTTE, J.                  | Socialization of the law  | 100-111 |
| VAN OUIRIVE, L.<br>en MOONS, A. | Employer's professional organizations   | 112-135 |
| VAN PELT, H.                    | The Beginnings of a Sociology of Sport in Flanders                                      | 136-140 |
| VERHOEVEN, J.                   | Dialectic and 'Verstehen'   | 141-165 |

## *Summaries of Doctoral Dissertations*

|                  |  |         |
|------------------|--|---------|
| D'OLIESLAGER, G. | Workers and culture.<br>A sociological study about the 'image' perception of culture and the patterns of leisure behaviour | 169-178 |
| DOOGHE, G.       | The structure of the family and the social relations of old people   | 179-187 |